

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

April 1, 2005

Dear Colleague:

We would like to share with you a recent editorial on the reverse side of this Dear Colleague letter, which appeared in the Washington Post on March 8, 2005. It discusses the challenges that face the scientific community under the current federal embryonic stem cell policy. These challenges have caused some states to establish their own embryonic stem cell research infrastructure, which will lead to an inadequate approach to the science that lacks both coordination and efficiency.

Without a comprehensive federal policy, embryonic stem cell research will progress inefficiently and slowly. All of the scientists and Nobel Laureates we have spoken with emphasized the importance of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) directing embryonic stem cell research. NIH is the best federal agency to provide a consistent funding stream and nationally directed oversight, collaboration and peer review processes.

Yet because of the restrictions placed on the federal embryonic stem cell policy, scientists' hands are tied. The policy announced by the Administration in 2001 is not suitable for the science in 2005. Significant advancements have been made since that time, for example, the isolation of uncontaminated lines at Harvard University, the development of disease specific lines at the Chicago Fertility Clinic and the work on nuclear transfer in South Korea. We must lift restrictions on the current policy so science can prevail.

We have introduced H.R. 810, The Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act, which has the broad bipartisan support of more than 180 cosponsors and is endorsed by major medical, research, scientific and patient advocacy organizations. To learn more about the current policy or our legislation, please contact Elizabeth Wenk (54165) with Rep. Castle or Meghan Taira (54431) with Rep. DeGette or visit our Stem Cell Web Page at <http://www.house.gov/castle/Castle%20DeGette%20ESCR.html>.

Sincerely,



Michael N. Castle
Member of Congress



Diana DeGette
Member of Congress

State Science

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IN MASSACHUSETTS, state lawmakers have vowed to pass a bill to pay for embryonic stem cell research, despite the governor's threat to veto it. Legislators in Connecticut, Wisconsin and Illinois have also called for the creation of state stem cell research institutes, and New Jersey's acting governor has backed a similar plan. It's hardly surprising, then, that in Maryland, home of the National Institutes of Health, Johns Hopkins University and a thriving biotech industry, legislators held hearings last week on a bill that would use tobacco settlement money to create a relatively modest \$25 million annual fund for embryonic stem cell research.

This unusual state interest in research funding -- normally a federal responsibility -- has emotional and political sources. President Bush's complicated policy, which allows federal funding for research on only a limited number of existing stem cell lines, has sparked a backlash from scientists, who loathe the restrictions, and from patient advocates, who believe that their relatives' conditions -- whether paralysis or Type 1 diabetes, could be cured by therapies derived from this kind of research. The movement is being given extra political momentum by opponents of the president who believe his policy is a sop to the religious right. And since California voters approved a \$3 billion fund for embryonic stem cell research, other states with big biotech interests have had another reason to push for greater funding: economic competition. In Texas, state officials testified that they fear a "brain drain." In Maryland, Sen. Paula C. Hollinger (D-Baltimore County), who sponsored the Senate bill, says that if something isn't done "we lose our scientists," as well as the biotech companies who might follow them to California or wherever else the funding is higher.

We have written in the past that the president's policy, however well intentioned, is due for reexamination: Scientists who work in this area now say they feel stifled and unable to carry out the research that they think is needed. But multiple state initiatives could create their own problems. As they stand, the Maryland House and Senate bills would create a panel -- similar to those run by NIH -- to determine, by a competitive process, which research projects merited funding. But such a panel, whether in Maryland or anywhere else, would have no means of measuring the merits of stem cell research projects against other research projects. The support of Nancy Reagan, the late Christopher Reeve and other celebrities has given stem cell research a high public profile, but that doesn't mean it will produce therapies. There is a risk, in Maryland as in California, that the program could be hijacked by a small group of insiders whose main interest is funding their own research. If Maryland legislators think they have money to spare, spending could be worth the gamble. But they should be wary of dedicating state funds to so narrow a cause.